

[EASTER First Marshall 2019 Matthew.doc]

EASTER SUNDAY
APRIL 21, 2019

FIRST, MARSHALL
PASTOR SCOTT FULLER

Psalm 118:19-24; Matthew 28:1-10

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

You've heard the old saying that the only two things we can be sure about in life are...**death** and **taxes**... Ironic, isn't it?...the two things we lock onto as absolutes in life are two of the **worst** experiences in life...

Well, I don't want to pile on our short list of *undesirable-and-permanent* truths, but it struck me earlier this week that maybe our list is...one line too short. In fact, I'm quite **certain** that today's Gospel story reveals one more *usually undesirable, yet certainly permanent* truth: in addition to **death** and **taxes**, a **third** thing in life that we can be **sure** about, **always** and for as **long** as we **live**, is...



CHANGE...right? Death, taxes and change – Happy Easter!!

Here's the deal – **CHANGE** is not **always** bad, but it is **almost** always **challenging**, often for obvious reasons.

Our family lived in St. Peter in 1998 when a tornado destroyed a good part of the town. One young mother in our congregation had been asleep upstairs in their *just-newly-completed-dream house* because she was sick with strep throat. Her husband and their two sons were in the basement absorbed in a movie... anybody want to guess what they were watching during a tornado

warning??? Yup – you guessed it, a broadcast replay of the 1996 hit, TWISTER!!

Early on in the movie, the t.v. station in Mankato had interrupted the show with a weather alert that St. Peter and the surrounding areas were in the likely path of a severe storm. A short time later, the alert turned into a warning. And then 15 minutes after that, the weather reporter said these words, “If you are in St. Peter, you need to get to a safe place now!”

While the boys made up a bed for their mom in the basement, our friend went up to convince his wife to come down. After a short disagreement, she finally relented and went downstairs as her family desired...

30 minutes later, the only thing that remained of their brand-new dream home was...the basement. Literally everything else from the foundation up, was completely gone...

At many of the community and congregational meetings we had over the next days, weeks, and months, one of the most often heard comments was: *I just want things to go back to the way they were.*

To such plaintive cries about this frustrating thing called change, all anyone could say was, *We have to define a new normal...*

...which is exactly what EVERYONE has to do when change happens to us – bad or good.

And what a story of change we encounter on this day of Easter...

Jesus’ friends and followers ... were devastated by the events of the Lord’s betrayal, trial and death. Hiding out, fearing for their lives, probably depressed, I’m sure they spent two sleepless nights asking those terrible questions caused by change: *What do we do now?? Where do we go from here???*

Change...**is** a *constant* for us. Think of the cycle of life in our congregation:

A high-school senior is getting ready to graduate and go off to college...
Change...

Two lovers are planning a wedding ceremony to make their 2 lives into 1...
Change...

A spouse is forced to plan their beloved's funeral... Change...

An elderly person makes plans to move into assisted living... Change...

A couple welcomes a baby into their family, their lives, their home...
Change...

Speaking of babies, I just happen to have a picture of our newest grandson – I want you all to meet LUKE STEPHEN FULLER...



Now, I'm not abusing my position as a preacher just to show-off our new grandson (not much, anyway!!). But I am showing this picture **because** Luke is the reason that I started thinking about CHANGE in the first place. Look at all the changes a baby goes through – first it's transformation **within** the mother's womb... And then that seismic reality shift to their little understanding of life called BIRTH!

From a warm, dark, insulated, predictable, secure environment...

To a cold, bright, loud, unpredictable – and seemingly unsafe setting...

THAT is a massive change!!

Everything that child knew changes in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye...

And yet...though our desire is almost always to *just go back to the way things were...*

1. that's never possible, and
2. change almost always goes hand-in-hand...with growth...

As the child grows, his/her senses develop with each new taste, touch, smell, sound, sight, experience...so there's no going back... However, we're always hopeful that there's a sense of rightness as he and she define a new normal...

And growth something we can do pretty well if we're surrounded by people who can help us say goodbye to what we used to know to be true, and walk with us into an unknown future...

I want to share a poem that our daughter just wrote about this very experience. Rachel had just dropped off our 6 year old granddaughter, Sophia, for her very first overnighiter... That little girl's world just expanded...and there'll be no going back... Rachel's poem is called "A Sweet Peculiar Ache." She writes:

It has been awhile since I have felt it – that strange, peculiar ache of a parent / at the acute moment / when a child grows up...

—not completely, mind you.

*Do not wish away her gangly legs / her gapped smile / the way she still grabs for my hand at night / (though hardly ever more during the day).
No, wish not these precious markers of her still-present childhood away / with your talk of getting older and growing up.*

I only mean a little bit older / I only mean a touch more grown / but enough that I feel it, that strange, familiar, peculiar ache.

'Tis the ache of recognition that now is not forever / that soon she'll no longer reach for my hand even at night; that her body and mind and spirit will mature / past the point of needing my sustained attention

(—oh, but I still remember how you felt as a baby / nestled in my arms / snuggled to my breast / reaching for me with tearful eyes! Though now you turn and wave, then leave with nary a backward glance / although, praise be, you still ask for a goodbye hug.)

*'Tis a strange, familiar / sweet peculiar ache.
The sweetness comes from seeing what you gain when you reach not for my hand: balance / confidence / strength / even, yes, when you fall—resilience.*

'Tis a peculiar ache / to watch your child / at the acute moment / when she grows up. A strange, / familiar /sweet / peculiar ache.

And I wonder if what Rachel saw in our granddaughter's little step toward adulthood is similar to what the Lord felt when he surprised the women at the tomb on that first Easter morning.

They had just endured some of the most painful and violent days of their lives, thrust into a **terrible** place of CHANGE...watching their dreams shatter and their hopes evaporate with the suffering and death of Jesus.



Their mission that morning was to anoint Jesus' bruised and beaten body as a way to say their final goodbyes... We know something of what that feels like, don't we? Those final duties and acts of love that we do to plan or attend the funeral of a loved one...

Babies provide us with an innate hope for the future... Yet we never quite forget the pall of death's presence, and how fleeting life can be. It is, as Rachel called it in her poem, the *ache of recognition that now is not forever...*

So the two Mary's make their way to the tomb – spirits heavy with grief, eyes sore from sleeplessness and crying, hearts gripped in that dull ache of a loved one's permanent absence, and the death of so many dreams. They knew what they would find, they knew the rules of life, they knew the rules of death...

However...as we in the audience already know, they were about to discover...that some rules are...just meant to be broken...**spectacularly** in this case!! No sooner had they reached the tomb, than they were shaken by an earthquake. Then an angel appeared and rolled the stone away from the tomb – *his appearance was like lightning*, says Matthew, *and his clothing white as snow* (well, we certainly know what **that** looks like, right??).

The guards fall to the ground like they're the dead ones, while the angel tells the women that Jesus, the dead man, is very much alive. Then we're told that *they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy... (when) Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him.*

I want to stop for a second here because that's kind of a puzzling image – the women holding Jesus' feet and worshipping him. Turns out, what it means is that they fell to the ground at his feet and worshiped him.

And what's very interesting in Matthew's gospel is that something similar happened before...years before...back...when Jesus...was a baby...you remember...



In Matthew 2:10-11, we're told that when the Wise men *saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage – they worshipped him.*

The very same Greek root word is used to describe both of these bookend groups worshipping Jesus: the Wise Men at his birth and the women at his resurrection – both groups fairly unconventional as witnesses to such amazing events.

The Wise men are shrouded in mystery – the Bible simply tells us:

*wise men from the East came to Jerusalem
seeking the child who had been born king of the Jews.
(MT 2:1-2)*

Matthew says nothing about their country or origin, their religion, their race, not even how many of them made the journey – we’ve assumed that there were three only because three gifts were offered. Yet very specifically we’re told what these wise men did: they knelt down at the baby’s feet and worshiped Jesus.

Isn’t that cool? So also the women who meet the risen Jesus are unique as the first witnesses to the resurrection. 1st Century Jerusalem was a man’s world – and yet, the very first witnesses to the resurrection...are women. In fact, not only are they the first **witnesses** – they are also the first **apostles**! The Greek word, *apostello*, means to send, particularly with a mission and a message. An apostle, then, is one who is sent with a message bearing the full authority of the sender.

So the very first apostles – people sent by God to bear witness to the resurrection in that male-dominated society – were the women who’d made their way to the tomb, to anoint the decaying body of their beloved leader.

What a massive and sudden change to their view of the world, of life, of death, of Jesus, of themselves, of the future...

And Jesus says to them... “Don’t be afraid.”

Then gives them a mission? ***Go tell the disciples that a few things have changed since we last spoke!!***

And those men who followed Jesus – receive the shock of their lives – probably like a newborn’s sudden exposure to the altered reality of life OUTSIDE the womb... Jesus’ resurrection altered their universe – forever – and there was no going back...



In the late 1920's, Eugene O'Neill wrote a play entitled, Lazarus Laughed. It tells the story of what happened to Jesus' friend Lazarus after the Lord raised him from the dead. It's kind of a strange story – but the point O'Neill makes is that once we're set free from the fear of death, there's nothing left to do about life's problems...but LAUGH!

Once raised from the dead, it's impossible for Lazarus to go back to fearing the things that drive us all a little crazy at times. Because he had returned from Death – there was nothing left to fear. So he laughed...because there was no going back...

So here's the question for us today: what are we to do with the knowledge of this reality shifting experience called resurrection?

Well, let's review the startling details.

There's nothing that can stand in the way of God's relentless will to bless the world with the hope of resurrection:

-stones that seal tombs are tossed aside like pebbles

-armed guards fall to the ground like dead men

-death itself is cast aside like some old moth-eaten funeral pall

NOTHING GETS IN GOD'S WAY to raise Jesus from the dead and declare his gift of love and forgiveness for all people, of every time and place – ***Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!!!***

So...what's left for us to do?

The most important thing, I believe, is for us to seize every opportunity to kneel down with the mysterious Magi and the amazing Mary's, and worship him, Christ the Lord, our Messiah and King.

The Magi, the Mary's, my grandsons and granddaughter, you and me, we can never go back to what we were before – nor do we want to! For we have been re-born with this news of God's amazing gift of grace and love.

Now, Jesus' resurrection does not mean we'll be able to avoid all those changes that are challenging in negative ways – that's just the way of life.

But what it does mean is that Jesus is alive and promises to be with us on every step of our journey. He will walk us through every experience of change and fill our hearts to overflowing with a sense of forgiveness, love and grace.

That's the good news of God for us on this Easter morning – because Christ lives, so do you...and you...and all the rest of us too.

Christ is risen! (X 3)

And all God's people said, AAAA-MEN!!!